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The Musacchio's serve a congregation of the Waldensian Church in Italy. Their parish is located in Sampierdarena, an industrial suburb of Genova.

#### THE WALDENSIAN CHURCH

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In front of me stood a short burly man, a docker from Genova harbour. His features were marked by hard work but his eyes were smiling. He said: "For many years I haven't been to Church. I was dissatisfied with the Catholic Church and my life felt empty. This morning I happened to come into your Church and found that it is possible to be a Christian in a different way. I am enthusiastic about your service. I will come again and bring my wife and son." The person who spoke to me in the hall of my Church at the end of the service could be considered as a symbol of the work of the Waldensian Church of Italy.

Few people know the singular history of this Church. It began in the XIIIth century as a movement for lay preaching based upon what later became the Reformation principle of Sola Scriptura. At first the movement was scattered over many European countries, but later, owing to persecution, became confined to some of the mountain valleys between France and Italy. Here the Waldensians heard the news of the birth of the Reformation. In the year 1532 they joined it, adopting a Calvinistic declaration of faith and a presbyterian Church order. In 1687, following a particularly violent persecution, all the Waldensians were driven out of their valleys and found refuge in Switzerland and Germany. But they felt that they had a mission in Italy and in the year 1689 crossed the mountains in a journey (the "Glorieuse Rentrée") that Napoleon later described as a model of alpine strategy, and reoccupied their valleys. At last in 1848 official persecution came to an end, and the Waldensians obtained their civil rights. Taking advantage of the political unification of Italy that took place in those years, they began their witness. Now, more than a century later, there are



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hundreds of parishes or little groups scattered over Italy from the Alps to Sicily. If we look at the list of Waldensian pastors we see that the characteristic Waldensian names are fewer, and have been joined by Neapolitan and Sicilian pastors. The Waldensian Church has thus begun to fulfill its vocation of being an Italian Evangelical Church.

Our interest, however, is in the evangelistic work of our time, and to describe this it is necessary to consider for a moment the general situation in Italy. Official figures show that 2 million people are without work. 13,037,627 men and women, that is 30,82 % of the population over the age of 6 years, are unable to read or write or both (Census of 1951). 125,000 school-rooms are needed; 25 % of the children in South Italy do not go to any school and of those who do, only 37 % reach the end of the fifth primary class. For every 100,000 inhabitants there are 17 doctors in Abruzzi and 11 in Basilicata. In many places parents hire ten year old children out to professional beggars for the equivalent of 100-130 swiss francs a year. Peasants may earn the equivalent of 3 swiss francs a day for ten hours of labour when they have the fortune to obtain work. These are merely figures, but they are frightening, and they give us some idea of the amount of suffering, unhappiness and human degradation that exist in this European country. Moreover, different financial and social situations in nearby countries, make the contrast of Italian conditions a bitter one. Many of the tourists travelling between fixed stops in Italy retain an impression that is more idyllic than real. The celebrated writer Carlo Levi, the author of "Christ Stopped at Eboli" said in one of his books that the Italians are divided into two classes: the exploiters and the exploited. The real truth is more complex, particularly if we consider regional differences. In the north, for instance, industry has created a socially conscious proletariat. But fundamentally the division is true, and present society is often almost feudal in type.

In the midst of this situation the Roman Catholic Church is so omnipresent as to be almost a part of the landscape. In any consideration of evangelism in Italy, one must take into account two very important factors in the position of the Vatican.

First, the Catholic Church maintains that she represents the only true Christianity. In Italian you say "Christian" to mean "Catholic". This is true not only for the simple peoples, but also generally, as where, for instance the National Broadcasting System (the RAI) speaks about different religions, it says "The Christians, the Mohammedans, the Jews, the Protestants".

Secondly, the Vatican has identified itself with the political party, the "Partito Democristiano", which has held power in Italy since the end of the war. It is not simply a catholic inspired party like those in other countries, but the only official one, sustained by the "Osservatore Romano" and with its best electoral managers to be found in the clergy. During the period preceding the elections there are many direct interventions by the Church. Miracles happen as when statues of the Madonna move their heads, cry or sigh. Parish-priests threaten those who will not vote for the Partito with spiritual punishments. The bishops take part in the campaign with declarations that are read from every pulpit.

Although the Partito Democristiano claims to occupy a centre position - and is at the centre of the existing political pattern - its politics are strongly conservative. At the end of the war Italy was pervaded for a short period by a new atmosphere. Many people had a confused desire for a decisive turn in the national history; many hoped that liberation from fascism would mean liberation also from many chronic and by this time gangrenous diseases of the national life. But this hope remained frustrated. The sores of social injustices, special privileges, and corrupt administration have continued and sometimes become worse. Big fascist personages have kept their public position, and pay ridiculously small taxes for the enormous riches which they accumulated during the war. National funds pay for catholic activities and newspapers. Relatives of the influential people of the Vatican have taken most of the important jobs of public life (electrical societies, publishing firms, committees for social assistance, financial companies etc.). State schools have financial difficulties while catholic schools receive subsidies and privileges from the State, and the same happens with hospitals and other charitable institutions. To the Italians of the second category, the exploited, who are the majority, it is plain that the Vatican wants to maintain the existing social and economic situation and is willing to change it as little as possible and then only in response to external pressure.

Thinking of these factors, is it surprising that a great number of Italians become atheists? If catholicism is the only form of Christianity and if this Christianity supports the oppressors, there remains nothing else to the oppressed than to leave it. If Christianity is a matter reserved for the rich, nothing is left to the poor but to look elsewhere. It is no mere chance that the catholic countries of Europe have the strongest communist parties. In the attraction which communism has for the under-privileged, one must have the charity to discern a positive element, namely a longing for justice, an aspiration to dignity, a demand not to be trampled on - confused and no doubt wrongly-directed feelings, which are nevertheless worthy of sympathy.

This alienation from catholicism on the part of more and more groups does not normally involve an overt separation from catholic rites. It is normal in Italy for prominent communists to send their children to catholic schools. Sometimes they do it out of fear. To show anti-clericalism could mean the loss of job or even more serious difficulties. But above all this attitude springs from an indirect fear of traditional public opinion. It has been said so often by the priests that the protestants are evil-doers (during fascism the charge was that the Americans paid for conversions, although now the changed international situation has made this charge out of date) or youth-corrupters, that people are afraid of the public opinion of their village or their friends. Whoever is interested in protestantism has the feeling that he steps outside of civil society.

Notwithstanding continued nominal membership in the Catholic Church, many Italians bear in their heart delusion and rancour against the Vatican. Most become atheists, convinced that religion is the opium of the people. But in many lives there is an expectation of something that may fill their spiritual vacuum and give an answer to the problems of their soul. Most of the people that have been moved by the message of the Waldensian Church and who form our communities have passed through such a crisis.

In this general situation, what are the dangers and opportunities which the Waldensian Church faces in evangelism? Some dangers are involved. There is, for instance, a strong temptation, in the face of the political consequences of catholic predominance, to preach a "protestant way of life", pointing to the protestant countries of Europe that have reached far better social conditions, and to limit oneself to criticising catholic positions. But we are conscious of the fact that the Gospel has questions to put not only to catholicism but also to protestantism and that the Truth lies only in Christ and in His word. From everyone who comes to our Church wishing to join us, we ask first at least a two year study of the Bible in order to test and give substance to his faith.

On the other hand, the situation that caused the Waldensian protest, still stimulates nowadays a loyalty to the Scripture. We are daily confronted by aberrations allowed and encouraged by a Church that has put aside the Bible. Think of the dogma of Maria Corredemptrix (Mary co-redeemer with Christ) now in the making, or, at a lower level, of the fetichism of the Neapolitans who believe that San Gennaro was "greater than Christ", and ask, "Has Christ done as many miracles as Saint Gennaro?". So we are led to see how the only criterion for the life of a Church is its faithfulness to the word of God, and to realize how disastrous are the consequences for a Church that fails in this loyalty. Because of this conviction we are watchful (perhaps not always successful!) that no authority, be it even of purest protestant orthodoxy, should prevail over the definitive one of the Bible.

How is evangelism carried out? In the first place one should say that the very fact that a minority church exists is already a stimulus, a question mark, calling people to think about the religious problem. Every member of our communities evangelizes when he has to explain his different position at school, in the army or in the office. Generally one must first explain to the pretended catholics their own position, so great is their ignorance of the matter even on fundamental questions, and then expound ours. The classical answer in these cases is: "But your religion is better than ours!" - which, however, too often does not result in any personal searching or definite decision. Furthermore, there is also an action of common testimony that takes place in the form of public meetings and through our press. During the allied occupation in Italy permission was won to hold a broadcast quarter of an hour service every Sunday morning. In the years following, the hour has been changed to a very inconvenient one, but nobody has dared to abolish it completely. Many letters with thanks or requests for information reach the organisers. Often people ask for an answer on a paper without a heading so that the postman or the family members would not know anything about this correspondence. In the region around Venice, groups of people were thus formed to meet in private houses for Bible reading together.

Now the most interesting area is South Italy. Many letters reach our administrative board from the mayor or the family chiefs of little towns, asking that a preacher be sent to them so that they may know more of this new form of Christianity of which they have heard. Too often we have to answer negatively because we cannot send and support a minister for the mission field. If a preacher is able to begin to work in a new place, there are normally two stages. First, the meetings are impressive and everybody takes part. But when the first difficulties come, when it is clear that the Gospel does not want only listeners, but also doers who commit their whole life, then some sort of

a selection takes place. Sometimes the group dissolves, but more often a solid and fervent nucleus remains. In this way many small communities around Rome and in Sicily were born. The members of these dedicated groups feel in their turn the need to go into the nearby villages during their free time in order to distribute Bibles, even in the face of difficulties made by the police. From personal experience, one must say that it is extremely challenging to have to preach like this at a streetcorner, without the protection of the pulpit and of the benevolent faces of the faithful parish-members. One has to leave aside many elements which, in a closed church building, seemed important, and one has to look for the essential.

In general, it is true that although the Waldensians are handicapped by poverty, by political obstacles, police obstruction and perhaps also by a certain lack of imagination in devising new methods, the evangelistic concern of the Church is alive. It is seen not only in the church leaders but also and above all in the church councils and in the individual members. Notwithstanding failings, inhabilities and timidity, we feel that the real aim of a church is not to cultivate itself but to bring to men the good news of God's Kingdom.

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